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There is no dignity in the sex trade

Amnesty International's dangerous proposal to decriminalize the sex trade

by Cindy McCain

Amnesty International recently adopted a [proposal](#) that recommends [decriminalizing the sex trade](#), a move that it says is for the human rights and equal protections of sex workers. This proposal instead gives amnesty to pimps, brothel owners and sex buyers by recognizing everyone in sex work as “consenting adults.” Men and women in the vulnerable position of selling their bodies for sex should be offered services and solutions to provide them with safe alternatives.

The proposal instead legalizes their exploitation. [Amnesty International](#) says that people who engage in sex work often do so because they have been marginalized and have limited choices. The decision to sell one’s body for sex made in the absence of better circumstances is not a human right. A buyer or trafficker who takes advantage of someone’s lack of choice for their own financial or sexual gain is an exploiter of human rights and should be criminalized.

Sex work and sex trafficking cannot reasonably be separated. Sex work fuels the demand for commercial sex, which is the indisputable driving force behind the sex-trafficking industry. Supply will always meet demand, and in this equation, supply is too often vulnerable men and women, and, at its very worst, children. Under [the group’s proposal](#), sex traffickers and brothel owners could operate with immunity for facilitating what they say is consensual sex work. Protections should not be afforded to those who prey on a person’s vulnerability or lack of basic needs. Decriminalizing sex work would put those in the sex industry, and vulnerable populations around the world, in greater danger by giving no authority to go after those who exploit others for personal profit, all under the guise of protecting those in harm’s way.

This industry is not safe, and Amnesty International understands that [sex workers in many countries face high levels of violence](#), but it draws the implausible conclusion that the danger lies in societal stigma, not in the precarious nature of the sex industry and those who exploit it. Recently in Charleston, W.Va., an escort [fended off and killed her attacker](#) when he arrived for a “date” with a “kill kit,” including a gun, handcuffs, an ax, machete, bulletproof vest, knives, a box cutter, bleach and several trash bags. This person is thought to be tied to the deaths of four other escorts and carried a list of 10 other women selling sex whom he intended to harm. In 2009, [a Texas man shot and killed an escort](#) for not agreeing to have sex with him, and the horror stories continue. Stigma isn’t the danger.

This proposal tells women, men and children that sex work is a safe and accepted choice, and that those who pay to have sex with them have the human right to express their personal autonomy. Amnesty International says that some buyers “develop a stronger sense of self in their relationships with sex workers, improving their life enjoyment and dignity.” The sexual fulfillment and dignity of sex clients as a human right has been placed higher than the safety and stability of those caught in the sex trade. Dignity for exploited women and children is ranked below that of commercial sex buyers.

Although Amnesty International does not have the authority to make or enforce laws, its influence as an international human rights organization presents a challenge in the uphill battle to combat societal acceptance of the degradation of women and children for sex. Its policy recommendations matter to the international community, although perhaps after this proposal, they should matter less.

This policy is a step backward in the fight against human trafficking worldwide. It is misguided thinking, dangerous for women and children, and a heartbreaking abandonment of those being

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